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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 001219

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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TAGS: [TBIO](#) [SENV](#) [AMED](#) [CASC](#) [KS](#) [CA](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: AVIAN INFLUENZA: BURMA UPDATE: OCTOBER 27, 2005

REF: A. RANGOON 1157

[B](#). RANGOON 1038

[C](#). RANGOON 1036

[D](#). STATE 193506

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The public in Burma is waking up to new stories and rumors about Avian Influenza (AI), prompting sudden fluctuations in poultry prices in some Rangoon markets this week. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has been working closely with the GOB's Livestock Breeding and Veterinary Department (LBVD) to track these rumors and reports of bird deaths in Burma. FAO has shared a copy of the latest LBVD report with post. Nonetheless, the people of Burma remain largely in the dark about the threat of AI, and the government continues to insist there are no indications of AI in Burma, even as it crops up in neighboring nations and the principal migratory routes for wild birds in Siberia and western China pass over this country. Post has conducted town meetings and circulated the latest Department guidance on AI to the small American community in Burma, but medical facilities in country are grossly unprepared to cope with even normal health emergencies, much less a pandemic. End summary.

[1](#)2. (U) Rumors have been circulating around Rangoon for the past week that the price of chicken in local markets has dropped dramatically due to illness or death among local chickens. Emboffs and FSNs did some spot checking this week of local supermarkets and outdoor "wet markets" and found that the price of "Burmese chicken" (traditional "backyard" fowl) has increased by 300 kyat (US 0.30) per bird while the price of commercially raised broilers has decreased by 300 kyat per bird. While health and agricultural experts have advised us that chickens raised in the open are actually more vulnerable to infection from wild birds than are commercial broilers, raised indoors under controlled conditions (ref B), the Burmese public does not seem to realize this; many believes that local free-range birds are safer than those mass-produced at chicken farms. We have found no indications that the price fluctuations are more than a seasonal phenomenon, compounded by public superstition about AI after hearing news of recent outbreaks overseas.

[1](#)3. (SBU) The FAO office in Rangoon reports that the Livestock Breeding and Veterinary Department issued a report in September that addressed the causes of recently fluctuating chicken prices in local markets. The report concluded that the price fluctuation was primarily due to seasonal factors, such as weather, and not outbreaks of AI. LBVD reported to FAO this week that they have not received reports of any suspected AI outbreaks in Burma to date. We have obtained a copy of the LBVD report in Burmese and are having relevant portions translated; we will submit copies to interested parties upon request. Burmese media, all of which is heavily censored by the Ministry of Information, have paid modest attention to stories about AI in Europe and elsewhere in Asia (usually buried in the international news section, never on the front page), but there has been no mention of any cases or suspected cases in Burma. Many Burmese citizens are only learning about AI for the first time in recent months and, in the absence of government information on how to recognize the disease or take health precautions, are relying on rumors alone to guide their actions.

[1](#)4. (U) Embassy distributed the latest Department guidance on AI (ref D) to all 100 members of the American community registered with the U.S. Embassy on October 25 via the Consular Section's monthly newsletter; the Embassy also held a Town Hall meeting on September 27 during the visit of our Bangkok-based RMO to provide information to the American community, both official and private, on AI. RMO Keyes provided information on viral epidemics, the transmission of viruses from animals to humans and the behavior of the H5N1 virus to the 50 attendees. He also described the history of AI in the region and recommended precautions individuals can take in the event of a flu outbreak, referring the audience to the WHO and CDC websites for the latest information. Emboffs also briefed the community on the need for Americans to make advance preparations and be vigilant to the AI threat in Burma, since the GOB was unlikely to freely share health information with the public. We also advised that medical infrastructure in the country is inadequate to respond to the challenge of a major epidemic. Attendees at the Town Hall meeting received copies of the WHO's "FAQs About Avian

Influenza" and the CDC's "Interim Guidance About Avian Influenza for U.S. Citizens Living Abroad."

15. (SBU) COMMENT: Burma is particularly vulnerable to AI, given its proximity to countries already feeling the effects of the disease and exacerbated by the governing regime's unwillingness to share information on any sensitive or embarrassing topic with the world or with its own public, and the GOB's lack of inclination to cooperate with other nations on this global threat. Burma already faces a public health crisis from many other communicable diseases; if AI takes hold here, the system will become overburdened quickly. The Embassy continues to provide the latest information to the American community in country and prepare contingency plans. At the present time, we have received no reliable indications that AI has reached Burma, but there is much in this country that we do not know and cannot easily learn. End comment.

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